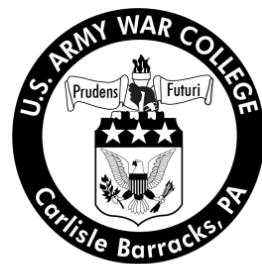


Strategy Research Project

The Arab Spring: Causes, Consequences, and Implications

by

Lieutenant Colonel El Hassane Aissa
Moroccan Army



United States Army War College
Class of 2012

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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by

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Many experts compare the Arab spring to the popular revolutions that shook communist states in the late eighties and early nineties of the twentieth century. After more than five decades of independence from European colonialism, autocratic rulers have failed to meet the legitimate aspirations of the Arab people. These include political freedom, economic prosperity and human dignity. Starting with the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia, the shockwave swept through the area and threatened the stability of this oil-rich region with repercussions felt internationally. The aim of this paper is to show that the current situation is a corollary of decades of failed policies, exacerbated by a unique economic crisis. The far-flung consequences, I will argue, require careful attention and cautious management from the international community headed by the United States, should the latter seek to preserve its pivotal role in the region.

THE ARAB SPRING: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, AND IMPLICATIONS

If, one day, a people desire to live, then fate will answer their call. And their night will then begin to fade, and their chains break and fall. For he who is not embraced by a passion for life will dissipate into thin air, At least that is what all creation has told me, and what its hidden spirits declare...¹

—Tunisian poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi

For more than a year now, the Arab world has been the scene of epic paroxysm; the greatest wave of empowerment the world had seen in the last twenty years.² From the Atlantic to the Pacific, young people moved by decades of disappointment with their elite and rejecting the violent approach to improving their daily life, have chosen to unravel the dust of submission. They have attempted to shake the status quo which has kept their situation miserable not only since their grandparents threw off the brutal yoke of colonialism, but has also worsened their economic, political, and social conditions.

The igniting event was certainly an incident linked to a street vendor in the streets of Sidi Bouzid (Tunisia), yet the historical moment is one of psychological rupture between the populace and “the man on the horse back” who has promised to restore historical prestige, achieve national prosperity, and build a bright future.³

As this paper seeks to explore the profound causes that prompted the Arab awakening, it will stick to those salient and undisputed elements which laid the ground to what has become known as the ‘Arab Spring’. These elements happen to be agreed upon from the perspective of the renowned speakers who animated the Arab Spring Symposium at the United States Army War College (USAWC) from January 30-February 01, 2012.

The consequences of these events across the Arab World were felt in many sectors and can be approached from many perspectives. However, focus will be put on only the political and diplomatic impacts, especially how the Arab States reacted to the roaring streets both locally and regionally. The reactions of key international actors require some attention particularly after the United Nation Security Council stand off on Syria following an ephemeral agreement on Libya.

Such state of affairs requires careful reading and reaction from the international community, especially in a period of economic crisis and widespread differently-motivated social disturbances.⁴

Causes of the Arab Spring

The wave of social protests that swept through the Arab world during 2011, toppling some long-standing regimes and seriously destabilizing others, was the consequence of decades of oppressive and authoritarian political systems, failed economic policies, and socially alienated and disaffected populations, mainly youths.

Indeed, when the self-immolated Tunisian citizen Mohamed El Bouazizi committed his final act of desperate protest on 17 December 2010, he was not aware that he was kicking the first domino piece in a long chain of events that is still unfolding today, having claimed four among the longest sitting Arab leaders.

The Economic Grounds of the Upheaval. Weakened by almost three decades of unsuccessful economic models that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank's (WB) austere and stifling policies only worsened, the economic situation in the Arab spring-affected countries suffered even more due to the 2008 economic crisis.

By the end of the 1950s, most Arab countries had gained their independence. However, the economic models chosen by the successive regimes were ineffective in

creating sustainable and competitive economies. While a strong public sector managing rentier economies – based mainly on production and export of hydrocarbons – has secured large balance of trade surpluses,⁵ the quasi-absence of an independent, globally-connected and highly performing private sector left the region with inflexible job markets and a narrow margin to deal with demographic challenges.⁶ So much so that major Arab world economies swung with oil price fluctuations while non-hydrocarbon economies saw their energy bills dramatically increased and their solvency questioned.⁷

In this regard, and for a long time praised as a good student of the IMF, Tunisia, a non-oil state, owed its decade-long average of 5 % GDP growth to economic prudence. Less flattering, however, is that this macro-economic stability furthered by the international financial institutions (IFIs) came at the price of a social welfare State-planned economy which had until the mid-eighties ensured a certain equal distribution of the national wealth.

Likewise, Egypt, the 2008 top performer of the World Bank and its International Financial Corporation (IFC) Group,⁸ experienced the same record as it “went through a wave of privatizations of bloated industries to produce a leaner, more competitive economy — but one with low wages and scant social benefits”.⁹

In August 2010, notwithstanding the serious economic crisis and the socially tense environment, the Tunisian government was planning to carry on its economic policy, faithful to the recommendations of the IMF which urged countries to meet their financial and budgetary balances, even in the face of the anticipated trends of world food commodity shortages and skyrocketing fuel prices.¹⁰ A 2010 IMF staff report went on projecting the country’s fiscal policy as follows:

...subsidies will stay at their lower 2009 level, despite an increase in international commodity prices...The central government deficit is expected to be entirely financed through domestic sources, while new loans from official creditors would cover the repayment of external debt.¹¹

Regionally, the situation of the south-Mediterranean economies, as depicted from the European perspective in February 2011, is likely to worsen, unless a reformed subsidy system with improved targeting is put into place.¹²

Political Disaffection as a Motive for Rioting. Almost a century after the first Arab Congress met in Paris (1913) to demand greater autonomy within the Ottoman Empire, the Arab populations, across the Mashrek and the Maghreb, are still aspiring to establish strong and stable national political systems that really mirror their history and bear their ambitions. Classified as either monarchies or republics, the twenty-two Arab States display complex and unique differences due to the genesis of these entities following World Wars I and II, their social and societal fabric, and the choices they made during the Cold War.

Indeed, the centers of power in the Arab countries have traditionally been held by the ruling dynasties or families, the military, nationalist secular parties or influential tribes.¹³ As such, the Arab populations have never been perceived as a crucial player in the process of power transfer except when it comes to endorse what has already been decided for them inside palaces and usually accepted by foreign stakeholders. Such truism supports the idea that democracy failed in the Arab world given that “No Arab head of state (except in Lebanon) has changed by democratic means for a generation: the average tenure of an Arab leader is 22 years.”¹⁴

Such clinging to power, whether on religious or secular bases, prevented the Arab societies from building modern states where democracy, the rule of law and

human rights would guarantee a smooth and non-violent power transfer between political actors.

Thus, while two decades ago Eastern Europe managed its own spring, most Arab regimes have remained unaffected by the winds of change. The global war on terror (GWOT) helped entrench the idea that the West's culturally-bound upper classes represented strong and reliable assets for the future,¹⁵ a deceit built around the equation “either you have your dictators and relative stability, or else you have al-Qaeda and global jihad.”¹⁶ However, the Arab regimes have gone through various changes that made the revolt possible. The two pillars of stability in Arab dictatorships – the military-security complex and the state control over the economy – were shaken.¹⁷ Indeed, the cases of the Tunisian and Egyptian military break glaringly with the Syrian and Yemeni examples where support from tribal or clan-based armies has always been crucial to the solidity and longevity of the regime.

The Demographics Dimension of the Upheavals. In 2009 the Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) pointed to the growing issue of human security within Arab states. Tied to the quality of the services the governments fail to provide in the fields of education, health and nutrition, human security is identified by the authors of the Report as a pivotal concept in overall state security. It was also pointed out that,

The pursuit of state security without attention to human security has brought on suboptimal outcomes for the state and citizen alike. And in the long run, the government that pursues state security without investing in human security is the government that achieves neither.¹⁸

In this respect, the preeminence of security issues over social issues in the Arab area is evidenced by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) figures for 2010. According to SIPRI, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region

has spent a total of \$117.6 billion in military expenditures¹⁹ while about 34.6 million Arabs were living under the two-dollars-a-day international poverty line in 2005²⁰ and double-digit unemployment rates (except in United Arab Emirates: 6%) among the Arab youth ranged between 16% and 46%.²¹

As a matter of fact, participants in the IMF Youth Dialogue and in the Arab Youth Forums, held in parallel with the establishment of the AHDR, all voiced their concerns about human security as a necessity to empower both the people and the communities.²²

Social Media as a Powerful Tool for Arab Spring. The uprisings in the Arab States have in common a wide and effective use of social media to communicate among themselves, mobilize their countrymen as well as to reach out to broadcasting channels and news media. The pictures of El Bouazizi, the Facebook page with the slogan ‘*We are all Khalid Said!*’²³ and the numerous slogans echoing “the people want to bring down the regime” or even a “Get out” poster in a toddler’s hands; all have been transferred millions of times and impacted the outcome of the show of force between the regimes and their populations. When clashes turned to military operations, the war of images was even bitterer with big media corporations taking the lead as well as the pulse of the street.

While such involvement was crucial for the populations’ final victory, great questions remain as to the role played by some media in stirring the masses and in some cases even breaching their own codes of conduct. Resignations of journalists, some of them long-established icons,²⁴ speak of the climate surrounding the unethical actions of some Arab media in the unfolding of the Arab Spring episodes.

Role of Education in Shaping the Outbreak of the Uprising. The environment of the Arab spring was marked by highly influential cable media as opposed to a stark absence of the state. It is hard to assess which role the level of literacy played in the events; however, it is quite clear that the educational environment in the Arab world was ripe for the emergence of such upheavals. A 2009 background paper for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) stated that while “low and perhaps deteriorating quality [has been] the major failing of Arab [public] education systems, private for-profit education has not helped improve quality of education significantly.”²⁵ The same report pointed out that the scope of private provision of education has been growing ever since governments have been urged to withdraw from providing direct public services under structural adjustment policies.

The report warned that damages from such a situation may extend to “breach of equity, erosion of social cohesion, worsening the distribution of income and wealth, and weakening the national identity.”²⁶ These problems, could only lead, in an era of economic crisis, to the loss of political leverage autocratic regimes need to have in order to enforce stability in front of growing demands for freedom, equality, and prosperity. Suffice it to say that, in 2010 alone, even though the government raised ten times the official monthly minimum wage to LE400 (about US\$70), Egyptians went to the street on more than 600 strikes, protests and sit-ins.²⁷ It was quite obvious that the regime has lost all control over its youth (60% of the population and 90% of the unemployed).²⁸

Consequences of the Arab Awakening

As events are still unfolding in Arab countries, whether in the streets or in polling booths, the consequences of the 2011 movements cannot be comprehensively assessed at this time. However, some hints may be drawn from the now year-long

awakening process at least from the political and diplomatic stand points. These will be considered at the individual state level, regionally and internationally.

State-Level Reactions. By the time Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak was forced from power by the Tahrir Square occupants, the new 'regional natural trend' was confirmed and local actors were compelled to adapt to the events, thus taking one of two kinds of approaches: reactive and proactive.

As the crowds started celebrations at the Tahrir Square, policy-makers in some Arab capitals hurriedly reacted with violent measures to curb turmoil in a move to nip these social movements in the bud. Yemen, Syria and Bahrain were among the countries that opted for a hard line against the claims of their citizens and each constitutes a unique case in terms of the development of their social uprisings. The different evolutions mainly rested on the social fabric of these societies, the regional dynamics, and the widespread use of small arms.

Thus, while Bahrain's Pearl Square squatters were quite easily dispatched by forceful measures in quasi-complete blackout of the local and international media, claims by the masses in the streets of the Yemeni capital Sana'a went unheeded by President Ali Abdullah Saleh, until an attack was about to take his life. In Syria, the regime, claiming foreign involvement, cracked down on protesters with military forces to whom President Bashar Al-Assad denied giving 'shoot-to-kill' orders.²⁹ This hard-line approach persists in Syria, even in light of growing international outrage and pressure.

The second approach sought to anticipate the claims of the masses by addressing the sources of the frustration among the population. Thus, on 18 March 2011, as the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 tightened the noose

around Libyan Leader Colonel Gaddafi, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia enacted a package of financial measures to anticipate Saudi families' social grievances. The relief measures, worth \$US36 billion, though hailed by the local press and easily within budget capacity, were downplayed as "an aspirin to ease medium-term pain, not a solution for the long-term housing, and unemployment issue," according to John Sfakianakis, chief economist at *Banque Saudi Fransi*.³⁰

Taking a different but no less proactive approach³¹ to meet the Moroccan population's aspirations, King Mohamed VI opted for institutional reforms by calling for the adoption of a new constitution to frame the future political and social environment. The move allowed the country to address the protests led by the February 20 Movement³² by voting for a new constitution, holding early parliamentary elections and renewing confidence in social and democratic constitutional monarchy.³³

Regional Reactions. Although since its involvement in the Libyan crisis, the Arab League has been playing a bigger role in the Arab upheavals, its overall homogeneity has decreased and internal divisions have been magnified.

The reaction of the Arab governments to the Arab springs – for they should not all be put in the same basket – appears to respond to a double-standard approach,³⁴ which is a reflection of different geopolitical dynamics. Where the Arab League sided with the populations by supporting a foreign military action against Libya and pushed for a further isolation of the Assad regime in Syria, a strong endorsement from the Gulf countries for the 'ideologically' closer rulers in Bahrain and Yemen should be noted.³⁵

Indeed, Syria's link to the Iranian agenda in the region and its dubious meddling in the Lebanese internal affairs paved the way for its isolation. Likewise, the Libyan

leader's eccentric and unpredictable actions coupled with his frequent and open altercations with many Arab leaders made his removal a priority. In both cases, the Arab League efforts were meant to lay the ground for international action. However, such a role starkly contrasts with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) sending security forces to shore up Manama's efforts to curb "Pearl Square" occupants and hosting the Yemeni President for treatment while championing an agreement between the parties, which ultimately secured a face-saving retreat to President Saleh.³⁶

As a result of these events, some observers have seen in the performance of the Arab League yet another sign of its irrelevance. Indeed, as the Arab springs were closing their first year, the League took two crucial decisions that violated its own Charter, which requires unanimity as a condition to exclude a member state.³⁷ In addition, the Arab League has postponed the ordinary summit that was due in Iraq in March 2011 and is probably considering to delay it for another period of time.³⁸ However, some contend that one consequence of the Arab springs is that they laid the ground for a profound reform of the League's charter, especially its decision-making mechanism which has stumbled so far on the State members clinging to their sovereignty.

Also within the regional context, the proposal by the GCC to extend its membership to Morocco and Jordan is yet another consequence of the Arab intifadas.³⁹ Indeed, in an unexpected step, the Secretary General of the GCC announced the decision of the Council to study a candidacy request from the two countries. The ambiguity of the timing, the field(s) of cooperation, and to whom the deal benefits – the two candidates or the GCC – cast serious doubt on the viability of such integration,

which some experts rushed to qualify as a ‘new club of Arab Sunni dynasties’ against Iranian hegemony and social unrest.⁴⁰

The aftermath of the regime changes in the Arab region has ushered in the unquestionable ascendancy of governments led by a solid Islamist component.⁴¹ Expressing the European assessment of the Arab awakening, Ambassador Leon Gross argues that regime changes in the MENA region will ‘logically’ bring Islamists to power. The Ambassador contends that some historical analogy might be driven from the communists’ successes in denazified Europe or from the triumphs of liberal parties in post-Soviet central and eastern-Europe. Both entities having played the torchbearer roles in challenging the status quo, or at least, having been perceived as such, the populations voted them straight away into office.⁴² This appears to be the common feature of the post-Arab spring upheavals, especially as it seems that neither violent Al Qaeda-like radicals, nor advocates of Iranian-style theocracy, nor hazy Islamist liberals have fared well in the elections held so far. Instead, “the prize is going to groups linked to the centrist Muslim Brotherhood, to evolutionary rather than revolutionary change, and more concerned with questions of Islamic identity and ethics than with imposing rigid God-given rules.”⁴³

Even though it is too early to assess this shift of power from dictatorships to democratically elected governments, premises of certain pragmatism within the new holders of power remain an encouraging sign. At least in Tunisia and Egypt, the Islamist parties seem to be focusing on internal agendas and at best do not seek any confrontation at the international level. Referring to this new reality, chief editor of Al-Quds Al-Arabi, 'Abd al-Bari Atwan, suggests that ‘post-Mubarak Egypt’ has adopted in

its foreign policy the same regional approach as 'Erdoğan's Turkey,' that is, "normalizing relations with all the neighbors [including Iran] based on a 'zero problems' policy, while allowing economic and strategic interests to prevail and resorting to dialogue to resolve all the old conflicts."⁴⁴

Quite understandably, recent evolutions in its Arab neighbors are not welcome in Israel where many experts reject declarations by the new Egyptian leaders as pure lip service. However, former US Ambassador to Israel, Mr. Martin S. Indyk, noted positively following a visit to Egypt that the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) consider their Peace Treaty with Israel a "commitment of the State," and therefore they ascertain to respect it. Besides, the MB party, who will likely control the first parliament of the democratic era, knows the people will watch them closely while they have to deliver on such basic needs as order, employment, and housing.⁴⁵

International Reactions. The Arab revolutions were considered both as an outstanding transition towards democracy as well as an unexpected regime change fraught with unwanted uncertainties.

Hesitations following the early days of the outbreak of turmoil underline the unpreparedness of the decision-makers worldwide to witness such stubbornness from street protesters in the face of long-established dictators. Yet, as the uprisings grew more organized, skepticism waned and declarations from all over the world started to hail the square occupants as legitimate voices for democracy.

In fact, the Arab awakening stirred up two diametrically opposed types of reactions from the international community. This distinction in positions epitomized discussions during the United Nations Security Council meetings about Libya and Syria.

Indeed, such discrepancies have highlighted different approaches in furthering European and US interests compared to the Russians and Chinese. While the former saw in the rise of new actors a hope for the democratization of the region, the latter's reaction showed reluctance to a regime change that would jeopardize the so hard won foothold in the MENA region.

As a matter of fact, in Libya's case oil being a crucial stake, Russian and Chinese heavy investments underscored Moscow and Beijing's support to embattled leader Gaddafi. It required a warning from Mr. Mustafa Abdel-Jalil, the Head of the opposition National Council (CNT), aimed to the two UN veto holders, to steer their position towards supporting the no fly zone.⁴⁶ Concerning Syria, the last client of Russia in the Arab world, it is clear that the UNSC stalemate is motivated by Moscow's geopolitical game in the region, especially as Iran, the other pillar for its regional agenda, is also under strong pressure on its nuclear program.

Looking at the Arab uprisings from another perspective, some experts argue that these events brought Russia and China to share the same positions in the UNSC. Moscow and Beijing have become accidental allies, especially in the Libyan and Syrian cases because they share a non-interventionist strategy and, more importantly perhaps, they are not keen on having President Assad removed from power. This position is reinforced by the potential impact of a civil war in Syria on Lebanon, Israel and the whole oil-rich region.⁴⁷

On the contrary, the EU and US adopted a favorable stance with regards to the regime changes that were occurring, since claims for such changes have been continuously emphasized.⁴⁸ In fact, apart from the early dithering that accompanied the

Jasmin Revolt in Tunisia, Europe, which considers the region as its backyard, appointed in mid-July 2011 Ambassador Leon Gross as an EU Special Representative to the South-Mediterranean region. The objective has been to accompany the regime changes in progress with the necessary guarantees to protect freedoms and minorities, and secure the stability of the southern Mediterranean rim. Likewise, the US administration appointed in September Mr. William B. Taylor as Special Coordinator for Middle East Transitions.

As the first transition processes were coming to fruition, the US administration went even further by expressing its readiness to “cooperate with any person [viz. Islamists] as long as they respect human rights, democracy and law.”⁴⁹ In fact, even though the idea of having an Islamist-inspired government within a decade of the GWOT was by all standards a far-fetched whim, such a scenario was not totally impossible, at least at the academic level. In early 2008, Larry Diamond stated that “the plain fact is that Arab Countries will not achieve democracy without Islamist participation, and possibly some period of Islamist leadership in Governance.”⁵⁰ While caution was expressed by Western capitals regarding the outcome of the polls – with Islamists to assume executive and legislative powers in the Arab region – satisfaction at the transparency of the processes and the commitment to the peoples’ will was widely shared.⁵¹

Implications of the Arab Spring

Understanding the implications of the Arab uprising for the international community requires, first, foreseeing the emerging new ‘Arab order’. Depending on which dynamics will prevail, the region may experience an exceptional opportunity for political change towards democracy. In this case, the removal of unshakable dictators

from Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen might be the first steps in the right direction.⁵² However, the political transitions in these states need to be strengthened because they are still reversible or in the worst case scenario, may usher in an era of ‘street dictatorship’⁵³ in response to potential failures to realize the aspirations of the revolution.

The interests of the world – the US included – will be furthered if the region successfully manages the transitional period through the crucially needed reconciliation effects and justice processes. No less important, electoral agendas and economic reforms need to be carefully thought through. Ultimately, a stable MENA region that is growing while keeping its natural resources accessible to global trade is a must for foreign stakeholders. However, the emerging actors in the region and the uncertainties they bring require that these new actors be carefully dealt with.

The states where a regime change has taken place happen to be those which were traditionally supported by the West, including Libya, which had been rehabilitated in 2003. This implies that, regionally speaking, the shift in the balance of power may not benefit the US and its allies.⁵⁴ Instead, it has created a power vacuum that other actors are eager to fill. The biggest challenge for the US in the aftermath of the Arab revolts is how to deal with the state and non-state actors who seem to be gaining from these more than year-long events.

Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey’s Game. Seeking to fill that power vacuum, Tehran, Riyadh and Ankara rushed into “a three-way competition” based upon a sustainable race for resources and position.⁵⁵ Syria is a case in point where this triangular relationship is shaping the future security design of the region.⁵⁶ What is puzzling about this situation is that the US seems to be at best only playing a supporting

role instead of taking the lead. The US Administration, which has been in a reactive mode thus far, seems to be watching a Turkish-Saudi *ad hoc* coalition designed to contain Iran in Syria after Teheran's success in Iraq and its game in Bahrain. And while it has been unable to break the traditional support given by China and Russia to the Islamic Republic, the US is keeping a low profile on the humanitarian issues in Gulf countries and not interfering with Ankara's schemes with regards to Syria, even though Turkey's stance on Syria may trigger an open conflict with Iran.⁵⁷

Certainly, a cautious and wise approach to these developing dynamics requires from the US enough flexibility and responsiveness, so as not to offend its allies in the region. At the same time, it would be highly advantageous not to get bogged down in any scenario which may trigger an open conflict in the region. A preferable strategy would be one that targets long term objectives, not necessarily by being complacent with the status quo, nor too eager to disrupt it by promoting aggressive regime change.⁵⁸ The political ambiguity in the post-Gaddafi era calls for caution and restraint and probably explains the stalled situation in Syria. Indeed, it appears more and more that at this point toppling the Assad regime is likely to occur. The international community led by US efforts to promote the fifth regime change in the region seems to be torn apart between opposing stakeholders' scenarios and end-states in what could have become a game changer for the future East-West and North-South relations.

Nevertheless, no long term policy for the region should neglect the emergence of two new actors with different though not necessarily opposing visions, the Islamists and the populations, who, for the first time in the modern era, have a say in the political scene.

Arab People as a New Actor. In the Arab world, the populations have never been really involved in the process of choosing their rulers or in sharing the dividends of wealth, let alone participating in the decision making process of their countries.

Indeed, it was obvious by the end of December 2010 that some of the Arab regimes had blurred the line between the status of a republic and a monarchy. Months before the outbreak of the purple revolt, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen were already flirting with Syria's example in a king-like power transfer; a choice that western chancelleries seemed ready to accept for the sake of social stability and an expedient Global War on Terror (GWOT). On the other hand, the billions of dollars of frozen assets accumulated by the dictators and their inner circles speak to the decades of undistributed wealth and money embezzlement, the heavy cost of which was borne by the populations. Experts estimated Gaddafi's savings and investments at over \$200 billion; all hoarded in secret funds while many of his people were living under abject poverty.⁵⁹

Besides, the 2011 social uprisings were a culmination point for the tumultuous relationship Arab populations have always had with their rulers. Indeed, over the years, the *Arab street* metaphor coined by the Western media has become a buzz word that usually depicts the Arab public opinion in a "negatively framed and *sui generis* fashion."⁶⁰

It is indeed the change in this Arab public opinion that needs to be correctly assessed and understood. Misinterpreting the choices of the *Arab street* in the aftermath of these revolutions may be damaging to the foreign stakeholders. From the period they were seen as mice in 2003,⁶¹ Arab populations have grown self-assertive and unpredictable once again, after being pronounced as dead and weak.⁶²

The Rise of the Islamists. The second set of new actors to emerge on the stage is the Islamists. Though not fatal in itself, the arrival of Islamist-led governments might need to be closely watched. What would be the outcome of an Arab League summit should the Cairo-based organization serve as a tribune for vociferous leaders to reach out to enflamed populations? What if these governments grow more responsive and yield to the populations' demands by opening their borders, especially in support of regional causes? What might be the result of an Islamic summit held to garner support for the Iranian regime? These are some of the uncertainties that foreign stakeholders might need to consider while dealing with the region.

Impact of the Arab Spring on the US-Israeli Relationship. Usually described as a beacon of democracy in the most conflict-ridden, unpredictable and treacherous neighborhood in the world,⁶³ Israel may see its narrative challenged and even weakened, at least from a theoretical point of view. The argument for a US-Israeli strategic partnership earlier directed against pan-Arab propaganda and starting in the 1990s against Arab countries supporting terrorism may lose much of its relevance once Islamist-led governments commit to peace, and the confrontation camp centered on Syria collapses. The Palestinian Islamic movement's (Hamas) recent steps towards reconciliation with its Fatah⁶⁴ counterpart and the liberation of the Israeli soldier Gala'at Shalit was read by many experts as a shift in the radical movement strategy. Some saw it as pragmatism widely attributed to the pressure from the Gaza population,⁶⁵ although Israel and the US continue to view Hamas as a terrorist organization, not to be trusted.

Pointing to this potential shift in the geopolitics of the region, some observers argue that the consecutive fall of Arab autocracies and a more democratic Arab world

undermines Israel's current status and its perception by Western nations as a "fellow democracy under terrorist threat."⁶⁶ It seems that for this reason, the US Government has espoused in 2011 with the Department of State's Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) an unprecedented document ushering in a new era of proactive diplomacy that engages actors beyond States.⁶⁷

Indeed, traditionalist regimes as they were, the Arab States proved to be frail in front of their nascent unorganized civil societies. The QDDR had pledged to put public diplomacy at the core of the diplomatic mission, mainly by "pioneering community diplomacy to build networks that share our interests; and expanding people-to-people relationships."⁶⁸ Thus one may expect that the Department of State may seek to engage the Arab constituencies, i.e. the youth, in order to shape the future of the region and pursue, by other means, the Bush administration's unaccomplished 'New Middle East' project.

In this regard, the US administration may need to reconsider its relationship with its traditional allies in the Arab world. While encouraging the modernization of parliamentary monarchies such as Jordan, Kuwait and Morocco by advancing women's rights and participative democracy, sending a clear message to absolute monarchies must be a priority.⁶⁹ No unconditional support can be granted to regimes which crush their people or use discrimination to marginalize their minorities, let alone if these policies target a large majority of their populations, as in Bahrain. In this particular case, a very carefully balanced approach is required as the radicalization of Sunni-Shiite intercommunal relations may benefit to Iranian interventionism in this country where the US maintains one of its strongest overseas naval presences.⁷⁰

Potential End of the Anti-Americanism Feeling. While disenfranchised Arab populations may continue to serve as a fertile ground for terrorist recruiting, it seems highly unlikely that a freed, rehabilitated Arab society would continue to blame American interventionism or support to oppressive regimes for its political, economic and social failures. In this regard, the US administration can build on the fact that the Arab springs were not only a counter-jihad trend among the Sunni Muslims – more than 80% of the Islamic world – but also a rejection of the Islamic ideology which automatically sees itself at odds with the West.⁷¹ Such an understanding would benefit the Obama administration which has scored credible points since it has vowed to follow a smart-power foreign policy in the region.⁷²

However, the United States as a global power may still be seen through the lens of the role it pledges to play in solving the Arab-Israeli conflict. According to the Zogby International,⁷³ a recent poll of Arab public opinion conducted in key American allied countries in the region, confirmed a consistency⁷⁴ in the Arab street showing that the respondents consider the “continuing occupation of Palestinian lands” as “the greatest obstacle to peace and stability in the Middle East.”⁷⁵ Therefore, it will be up to the American Administration to seize the opportunity of the regime change in the region to give a new start to the peace process.

Which end-state in the MENA region? The most important thing about the Arab springs perhaps is that the stone is still rolling. Even though elections have brought some hope to the populations, the processes engaged so far have shown little progress and the future of the region remains meek. The Egyptian experience seems to require more time before being confirmed as successful. The case of Libya – solved the hard

way and with foreign military intervention – has not brought the peace once foreseen. These results should be taken into consideration before striking a hasty analogy between Syria and Libya.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring has proven to be a process more than a series of events. Its shockwave, still relentlessly reverberating, has reached areas outside the MENA region. While its long term impact has yet to be assessed, the Arab awakening challenges the international community and the United States, in particular. They must make the best interpretation of the unfolding episodes and thus come up with the right approach to deal with the underlying problems infesting this resource-rich area, in order to mesh the region's people with global society.

The point reached by the Arab revolts, currently stumbling on Syria, raises many questions as to the right approach to deal with this political tsunami out of which both the Arab population and the international community hope will come freedom and dignity. As the world's superpower, the United States is even more challenged to further its values but also its interests while trying to recover from a severe global economic crisis. In this regard, any future US policy has to reckon with the new dynamics shaping the region.

First, the last ten years have reinforced the emergence of regional actors with different agendas and different *modus operandi*. For Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the Arab springs led to perceptible though hardly declared moves to fill the vacuum left by the Obama Administration's soft-power approach to foreign policy.

Second, the Arab Spring epitomizes the empowerment of the masses in the MENA region. Such transfer of power requires foreign stakeholders to work closely with

the nascent Arab civil societies. This change has been understood by the US and European States, not by Russia and China which still bet on ailing governments, be they the Baath regime in Syria or the Mullahs in Iran.

Third, the Arab Spring fully established moderate, non-violent, and citizen-focused political Islam, as opposed to fanatic ideological Islamism. The elections held so far and the premises from Libya and even Syria, should there be a regime change in the foreseeable future, reinforce this theory.

These lessons require the international community led by the United States to play a more proactive role to meet the needs of those who started these events and to whose future it will, ultimately, be either beneficial or detrimental.

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